THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Commit Subversion – Keep the Sabbath

July 20, 1997

John M. Buchanan

Rest your heart in God,
let yourself float
on the safe waters,
loving life as it comes,
with all the rough weather
it may bring.
Give, without counting
how many years are left,
not worried about surviving
as long as possible.

Brother Roger, Prior
The Taize Community
A Life We Never Dared Hope For

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COMMIT SUBVERSION – KEEP THE SABBATH

John M. Buchanan
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"'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'
For many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat."
Mark 6:31

I spent part of nearly every day last year on an airplane, a regimen which, as you know, involves a fair amount of stress and the ever-present possibility of a glitch: delayed or canceled flight, lost luggage, a center seat between two large seat-mates, a passenger in the seat in front of you who insists on lowering his seat-back in order to sleep, which means on a tight Boeing 737 that you have a head in your lap and that people with bifocals cannot read a newspaper, and, in the name of economy, two hour flights at meal-time with no food … not to mention the challenge for those of us who live downtown of getting to the airport.

But not long into the regimen I made a discovery: once you're on the plane you have a gift on your hands – time: empty, unoccupied, gloriously free time in a place where you are fairly inaccessible.

There are limits to your inaccessibility, of course. You must not encourage your seat-mate who wants to talk, even by smiling pleasantly. Sometimes it helps immediately to open a big, serious book with tiny print. And you must resist the temptation to use the seat-back telephone which turns out to be very expensive. But there you are, having been given an unexpected and perhaps unwanted gift of time, something you somehow don't seem to have in the earth-bound routine of getting up and rushing to the office.

Now travelers will not admit this readily and, in fact, may already be resenting my letting this cat out of the bag, but some of us are enjoying that gift of time. Some of us are using it. I learned I could dictate. (It works better if you don't have a seat-mate and aren't beside the engine.) Some are writing, reading business reports, some are reading frivolous novels, some are looking out the window, some are sleeping. What I discovered is that I had been given a gift for which my tradition has a name. It's called Sabbath. To regard that time as Sabbath, as a gift, changed everything for me.

I learned to read my devotions and pray and to write letters and notes and on a few occasions, to write full sermons – without interruption. And to read. In fact, last February, on a United flight to California, I got the inspiration for the sermon I knew I would want to preach in the summer, preferably on the Sunday before we headed for the ocean.

What I was reading was a review of a surprise best-seller of a few years ago, *The Overworked American*, by Juliet Schor. Professor Schor, with an economist's eye for small detail, reports that for all classes of working Americans, "stress and work hours are up and sleep and family time are down … wives working outside the home return to find a 'second shift' of housework awaiting them. Husbands add overtime or a second job to their schedules. Single parents stretch in so many directions that they sometimes feel they can't manage. Simultaneously, all are bombarded by messages that urge them to

spend more (and so, ultimately, work more), to keep their homes cleaner (standards keep rising), and to improve themselves as lovers, investors, parents or athletes. Supposedly to make all this possible, grocery stores stay open all night and entertainment options are available around the clock. "We live," says Schor, "in an economy and society that are demanding too much from people." [See Dorothy Bass, "Keeping Sabbath: Revising a Christian Practice," *The Christian Century*, January 1-8, 1997]

And, as if on cue, the next thing I read on that flight was a *USA Today* (no, I didn't buy it; it was in the seat-back) feature, "Up to Their Laptops in Packed Powder: When Vacations Mean Business." The picture was of a skier, in full ski regalia, sitting at a computer in an office overlooking the slope at Vail. The story was about the new Sprint Communications Center at Vail, a huge success, which is designed to meet an urgent need Americans have to keep working while on vacation. The ad brochure urges, "conduct business without leaving the mountain ... skiers lose very little time on the slopes while maintaining business productivity." The man in the picture, a New York broker, was quoted, "I feel like I'm at a loss without a machine in front of me. I get antsy – I'm addicted to checking my stocks. When I found out there was a terminal up here I was elated." [*USA Today,* 2/21/97]

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One time Jesus invited his friends to a small sabbath. He had sent them out for the first time, two by two, to the villages of Galilee, to teach and heal and preach. And now they had returned, exhilarated, exhausted, glad to see one another, hungry, eager to talk, to tell him how it had gone, to share travel stories, to laugh together. In the meantime, a crowd of people is pressing in, clamoring for his attention, just a word, a blessing, the touch of his hand. They had been there all day but now the crowd is growing. They are bringing their elderly, sick, blind, crippled, little children.

And at just that moment Jesus says, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." Mark adds, "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." They needed down time, time to debrief, to reflect on what they had experienced, time to eat and drink together. It was not luxury. It is, in a very real way, Jesus attempting to save the sanity, stability, energy, productivity, the very lives, of his dearest friends.

Interestingly, in this instance, it didn't work. They got in a boat and headed for a lonely spot – but the Galilean lake is not very large. The crowd simply followed the boat down the shoreline and when the boat put in, there they were, still clamoring, pushing, shoving, only now they're hungry. And so the scene shifts and so does the theme, as Jesus attends to their feeding.

But first there is his gracious invitation to a time and place apart, where in their inaccessibility they could rest and simply <u>be</u> for awhile. A small Sabbath.

It is, as a matter of fact, one of the basic ideas in the Bible. It has been legalized and trivialized almost beyond recognition, but Sabbath and Sabbath-keeping are very close to the heart of the biblical tradition.

It shows up in the foundation of Israel's law, the Ten Commandments: the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." The reason is that on the seventh day of creation, God

rested. And God's rest became part of the magnificent mystery of creation. Creation requires rest to be completed. An artist friend of mine told me once that the most important brush stroke is the last one: that a good part of creative genius is knowing when to quit, that a lot of great paintings have been ruined because the artist didn't know when to stop and kept dabbling at it, trying to improve it. God knows when to stop. God knows how to step back, take a deep breath and enjoy what God has created. The work of creation includes the cessation, the enjoyment.

Martin Marty quoted a Jewish scholar recently, Arthur Waskow, head of the Shalom Center. "In Jewish life, Shabbat is the time when you stop doing – you study Torah, you sing, you dance, you celebrate and you reflect on what the previous six days have been... If there were a single piece of Jewish wisdom that was most important to impart to the human race at this very moment in history, it would be the importance of Shabbat. I mean the genuinely profound sense of pausing to be, to reflect, to break the addiction to working, producing, making, inventing." [*Context*, April 15, 1997]

Waskow is on to something very important: stopping is essential to our being. Ceasing to do is necessary in order to be.

But there is another and deeper meaning of the biblical notion of Sabbath. When the Ten Commandments appear a second time in Scripture, in the book of Deuteronomy, the focus is not creation, but captivity. Now the context is that time when the people of Israel are slaves in Egypt. The rule is to remember that your ancestors were slaves and keep the Sabbath. That is, remember that there was a time when your ancestors couldn't keep Sabbath, couldn't stop working because they were slaves. There was a time when military might and political oppression transformed your ancestors from God's children, precious bearers of God's image – turned them into work units, brick-making machines. In that context, or any context that turns people into work units, keeping the Sabbath became a subversive activity.

Later, when the people were in exile in yet another country and culture, this time Babylon, the Sabbath observance was a subversive act, an act of faith in God and a defiant rejection of all other gods and world views. It was, says Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, an act of trust and confidence in the one God. It was, he says, the affirmation of a new sanity in a world that felt to them as if it had slipped its moorings. [See *Interpretation:* Genesis, pp. 35, 36] They were in exile. There was nothing about life in Babylon that reminded them of who they were, except once a week when they kept Sabbath. During the Holocaust, somehow to keep Sabbath, light candles and tell the story, share food and stop doing was to remember and to restore sanity and somehow to gain life back, if only for a moment.

Perhaps that is why there is a renewed interest in the relevance of this very old idea. Dorothy Bass is a wonderful Presbyterian scholar who directs the Project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith at Valparaiso University. Dr. Bass believes that it is very important for modern Christians to recover this old idea. She writes, "Whether we know the term 'Sabbath' or not, we, the harried citizens of late modernity, yearn for the reality. We need Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it." [Ibid, *Christian Century*, p. 12]

First, Dr. Bass suggests we have to unlearn most of what we think we know about Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath became, over the years, an "ism" for Protestants...Sabbatarianism, which was the reduction of this creative and redeeming notion to a list of rules and regulations. That process had already begun in Jesus' day. He broke Sabbath rules on several occasions, seemingly intentionally in order to make the point that God had created the Sabbath for humankind to enjoy – not the other way around. Sabbatariansim became trivial and was ultimately expressed in this country in what used to be known as "Blue Laws." The ethical/moral thrust was not on a celebration day for the good of society and all its people, but rather the prohibition of many activities that are enjoyable.

The Puritans outlawed "vain and profane walking about" on the Sabbath. Over in the Church of Scotland in 1842, the Presbytery of Glasgow got so worked up over the initiation of train service to Edinburgh on Sunday that it produced a resolution condemning the train ride as a "flagrant violation of the law of God." In Edinburgh, ministers lined the platform to inform arriving passengers that they had bought tickets to hell. [See William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, pp. 37, 38]

Presbyterians were noted in this country for their Sabbatarianism. Mostly it was enforced inactivity, which I found oppressive in my youth. Many of us grew up in homes where Sunday activity was very different from the rest of the week and in towns where no store or gas station was open on Sunday. Remnants of Blue Laws still exist in some places. In the Border Country of Scotland, where we lived for awhile, the law prohibits the drinking of alcoholic beverages on Sunday in the county where you live. The purpose was to discourage people from going to their favorite pub on the Lord's Day. The result was that if you wanted a glass of wine with lunch or dinner, you had to drive to the next town – which is what everybody did.

The focus changed, from a healthy, redemptive practice for the good of society, to individualistic prohibitions. And in that process of trivialization, something very precious was lost.

We need Sabbath. We're never going to live again in a world where stores are closed on Sunday – but we need, I propose, a renewal of the kind of thinking that understands that rest is necessary for wholeness; that work must stop in order to be completed, that people are ultimately demeaned – that you and I demean the nobility and sanctity of our own lives if we cannot stop doing – in order to be.

It is, I think, ultimately theological. Addiction to work, the inability to stop is, finally a kind of idolatry; a giving of our heart and soul and body and spirit for the purpose of securing our salvation. A message by the way, eloquently affirmed in the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, which produced the wonderful mantra for a work-addicted, sick materialism – "show me the money." It is ultimately, our need to affirm ourselves and establish our identify, to be somebody, and our captivity to the culture which says that the way to do that is to get ahead, to win, succeed, earn more, buy more, consume more – all of which means work more, never stop, never let up.

And so it is ultimately a matter of coming to terms with grace, with the fact that we are who we are because of our creator, not our bank account: that our status is established by the love of Jesus Christ, not the nameplate on our office door and that our ultimate security, our salvation, is in God's hands, not our stock portfolios.

In the meantime, we can, I think, all of us – move toward a recovery.

We can, for instance, reclaim responsibility for our own lives and understand that all demands on our time are not equal. We can learn to say "no" and to say "yes." I think it was Stephen Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* who observed that nobody on his or her deathbed says "I wish I had spent more time at the office." But plenty of us live with remorse, regret, anger, even grief, that we are missing important, one-time-only occasions with our beloveds. Well, we don't have to do that. You know what restores your soul. You can choose to do it – to re-order your priorities. Maybe it's listening to music or a 20 minute walk by the lake. Do it, whatever it is.

We can take responsibility. And we can put into practice our need for an inner life. Surveys about American spiritual practice always show that Americans want to pray but don't because they don't have time. My travel schedule gave me back my morning devotions. I'll share one of my secrets about devotions for busy people. I learned somewhere that one of the most ancient prayers was the single phrase, "Lord have mercy;"or what the monastics called the "Jesus prayer," "Lord Jesus Christ, Have Mercy Upon Me." Or the liturgical response, "Lord, Have Mercy, Christ Have Mercy, Lord Have Mercy." I learned that as you walk or jog, you can retreat into prayer, as you breathe in "Christ, Have Mercy," and as you breathe out "Lord, Have Mercy." And I've learned to hum to myself throughout the day a simple tune, *"Jesus Remember Me, When You Come Into Your Kingdom,"* from the Taize Community in France.

Professor Bass says that Sabbath keeping is for joyful worship and reunion with the community of faith, for time with those we love – not "useful time" but time "wasted on the pleasure of being together, and for rest, sleep, reading, love, eating and drinking."

Simple enough, but not easy to do in a culture that insists that we need to keep working and producing and creating and buying and selling.

My invitation is to become a subversive to that culture. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Now, a small Sabbath, of quiet prayer and reflection. I've asked John Sherer and our musicians to help us learn, *"Jesus, Remember Me When You Come Into Your Kingdom."*

Please sing it quietly, praying, where you are now, and in the week to come. Amen.